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Denise Anne-Marie Cathey
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Our Time Sustained: An Exploration of Travelers in Transition

APPROVED BY

SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:

Mary M. Rivas-Rodriguez, Supervisor

Ellis Reed

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Denise Anne-Marie Cathey

Report

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Abstract

Our Time Sustained: An Exploration of Travelers in Transition

Denise Anne-Marie Cathey, M.A

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Supervisor: Mary M. Rivas-Rodriguez

The Traveler subculture has a shadowy existence in modern American life. A loose network of people who live off the grid, Travelers build their lives around constant movement, traveling from place to place by hitchhiking, walking, illegally riding trains, cars, or whatever other means are available to them. As a group they prize independence from societal norms, living on the road and the loose network of relationships between Travelers.

However, most Travelers, due to the prevalence of drugs and alcohol and physical exhaustion, wind up either leaving or being forced out of the Traveler subculture by the age of 30. Those that do stay usually run the risk of either being arrested often enough that they go to prison, joining the homeless population or simply disappearing. Adjusting to life off the road presents its own difficulties as Travelers, due to their previous lifestyle, have limited options and experience for living settled lives.

Through a combination of photographs and a written essay I examine five Traveler's journeys from leaving or being forced out of the subculture, either permanently or temporarily, and their struggles in building their current lives in San Marcos, Texas.

Table of Contents

Text.....	1
Photographs.....	22
Vita.....	47

Travelers occupy a strange half-world living somewhere in-between the daily 9 to 5 workday of the average American and the wandering ways of their long-dead forebears of the American frontier. Not to be confused with Irish Travelers, who travel as part of their ethnic group's culture, American Travelers come from many different backgrounds and choose their way of life. They live primarily on their own or in small short-term groups endlessly traveling towards the next city or town.

In San Marcos, Texas five Travelers whether by choice or by circumstances have had to build new lives for themselves, away from the paths they once lived to travel. Now they have to start building new lives for themselves, while figuring out their identity now that their old life is gone.

John and Maria

Maria and John, who asked that their real names not be used, live on the west side of San Marcos in a neighborhood comprised of small family and rental homes. Inside their home is an eclectic mixture of handmade and scavenged art, the most notable being a black painted plastic deer head that hangs, leering with red eyes over the living room. Scattered around the house are books and mismatched pieces of furniture the couple has collected together since they moved.

The house itself is just a stones throw from the Traveler hop out for the railroad tracks, a spot where trains slow down enough that a Traveler can safely jump off, that they used to ride together. From their living room you can hear the rattle and horn blowing from the multiple passes of freight and Amtrak trains as they move into town each day. The couple have only been living in the house together for about a year, after moving out of the rented garage attached to a house they used to live in.

Together they have more than a decade of experience traveling the country as part of the Traveler culture scene.

Travelers, also known as nomads or vagabonds, are an independence and momentum loving subculture in the United States who live their day-to-day life off the grid.

While not strictly organized, Travelers form a loose network of people who share a common urge to keep traveling the country in whatever method they choose, whether on foot, by car, or by illegally riding trains.

Usually only carrying basic essentials in large packs, they make their living by “spainging” or asking for spare change, holding up signs for donations, busking or short-term labor like migratory farm work or construction, to fund their lives on the road.

John, a wiry 30 year old with long dyed dreadlocks, grew up in middle class suburban Southern California, with his stay at home mom and a Vietnam War veteran turned financial loan officer dad. John started traveling in 2008 after dropping out of community college for the second time. Each time he would enroll in college he found himself unable to succeed at it, with his preferred experiences being taking doses of mescaline, a psychedelic drug, in the woods near campus. Though John tried to keep up with college, he eventually dropped out for the second and final time.

“I was running away from myself and I didn’t realize that until many years later. I was looking for adventure because I didn’t see anything for me,” he said. “I didn’t see myself as being productive in that town, being helpful to my family.”

He had a friend who he knew rode trains, and the next time the friend came back to town John decided to leave with him. Over the next ten years he traveled across most of the United States.

A few years later, on the other side of the country, Maria set out to travel as well. She’d spent the bulk of her childhood growing up in a small town in Maine with a population of less than 2,000. It was in Boston that she’d make the transition to living out on the road.

“Even in Maine I was the weird fucking kid and I was the weird kid even among the weird kids. Like I had no fucking friends,” said Maria. “So I always wanted to go, get away and fucking travel.”

Her first real contact with Travelers was on a subway.

“I was riding the subway and I saw these two kids and they just looked so fucking miserable. They were just sitting on their bags on the subway.

But they were also just two of the most beautiful people I’d ever seen and as soon as I saw them my heart was just like ‘boom’,” said Maria.” They had the dreads and the patched-up clothing and the giant packs... I saw them and I was like ‘Okay I want to do this.’”

Despite the fact that the Travelers looked miserable, there was something in them that she admired and wanted for herself.

“I could tell that they were only really beholden to themselves and didn’t give a fuck what anyone else on that fucking subway thought about [them],” said Maria. She felt like she had some of their attitude, but she wanted more.

“I wanted to not be around the same people who were going to make fun of me and talk shit and treat me like I was sub-human like what I grew up with in Maine. I wanted to be only beholden to myself.”

Around two years later, just a month after her nineteenth birthday, she hopped onto her first train to get out of town.

John and Maria’s paths finally collided in 2013 on Castro Street in San Francisco, California. Maria was hanging out with a group of fellow dirty kids, hustling to make some change by joking with passing gay men that she was their daughter, and playing a game to pass the time.

Dirty kids are just one of the many colloquial groups that run within the subculture. As the name suggests, they are usually covered in layers of dirt, in their early teens to late twenties and living off the ‘grid’.

These aren’t groups with firm definitions but usually they are specific to the type of traveling that the Traveler does. Crusty kids usually prefer to ride trains whereas a rubbertramp lives and travels out of their car. Dirty kids will usually travel using multiple types of transportation, whether by walking or train hopping. Each group tends to have close ties and a group-specific shared culture, whether in their language or in waiting games.

“There’s a fun game you can play in SF with the other dirty kids and it’s called show me your asshole. I’d just walk up to people and say, ‘Hey show me your asshole,’” said Maria.

John, wearing a pirate-esque tricorn hat and a long frock coat with a cane, sauntered down the street past her when Maria yelled at him “Hey show me your butt hole!”

Without skipping a beat, John dropped his pants and bent over to spread his butt cheeks.

“Then he pulls his pants back up and tips me his hat and he continues walking his way and I continue walking my way,” said Maria. Three days later, on John’s birthday, they were together celebrating and traveled from then on as a couple.

They’d travel together for the next few years across the country, but a problem inherent in the Traveler community reared its head and derailed their way of life. Maria was the first of the couple to see the problem ahead of them.

“There is kind of an expiration date on Travelers. So, once you get into that 30 range, which John is 30 now, their bodies get wrecked and the alcoholism starts to make them wet brained,” said Maria. “You either overdose off of drugs or something else, get arrested and go to jail for a long time, go insane or you retire.”

In the case of drugs, John remembers traveling to San Francisco with a group of Travelers, including a group of brothers, one of whom had gone, as John describes it, insane. “He was so far gone out there talking all this crazy...he did way too much LSD and the DMT [a powerful psychedelic drug] did not help anybody...”

It’s not an uncommon occurrence in the Traveler community, John said.

“I’ve sat there and watched somebody’s brain break literally,” said John. “We weren’t even on that much LSD at the time, but because we were doing a lot in succession...”

To add to this, Maria didn't have much success finding more than a handful of Travelers who'd made it to 60, let alone who were still mentally sound. She made her decision; they were retiring.

She unilaterally decided to do it, without consulting him. "I sort of snuck it on him," said Maria.

When they got to San Marcos, Texas they bought their van, a 1993 Chevrolet Gladiator G20, which John thought they were going to use to travel.

"We kind of just didn't leave after we got the van ready to drive," said John.

That summer they lived in the van by the San Marcos River, but it got incredibly hot in the summer, and the lack of air conditioning made living outside in the summer uncomfortable. It also lacked basic amenities like a bathroom or Wi-Fi.

Though, the couple would move the van around town to Walmart or friends' houses in order to use their Wi-Fi or air conditioning. Occasionally they would have to deal with the police, like when a neighbor of a friend of theirs called the police on them after they parked outside their house. They'd been outside the house to use the Wi-Fi.

Eventually they moved into renting a garage attached to a house, rented by their friend Molly, to get out of the heat. For \$250.00 a month they had the garage to themselves. However, the house was filled with roaches that would congregate in the garage space. In addition, the air conditioning didn't extend to their space and the overhead lights only worked when the garage door was open. It was an uncomfortable living situation for the couple.

When their roommate situation went south, they moved into a small tan two-bedroom house with a side yard that they still live in. John works as a pizza maker at Valentino's

Pizza, a place that serves as a live music venue and Traveler hangout downtown. Maria works as a professional interviewer at Customer Research International, a survey call center. They have electric and water bills, a lease and everyday expenses to pay now that they've settled down together

Moving from their nomadic lifestyle into a "normal" life in San Marcos hasn't been easy. Now they own things.

"Like when we moved in here and the living room was stacked full of boxes I was like 'What the fuck is this shit?'" said John. Before, the couple traveled with just their backpacks and their dog, Hades.

There were other adjustments, as well. When each action can mean the difference between life and death on the road, survival mode kicks in and makes Travelers do what they have to do to keep going. Often issues like depression can get pushed away in order to do the tasks that help you stay alive, such as finding water and food.

"If you don't do it it's just going to fuck yourself," said Maria. Being retired means that Maria, who has depression, now has to deal with her issues as she isn't daily fighting to stay alive. It gets harder when people know her history.

"Most people don't realize that you are struggling with stuff because a lot of the things people are used to because 'Oh you were just a dirty homeless person, you're fine.' Not eating right? Oh it's just a habit from when you were homeless when it's really masking a deeper issue," said Maria. "If I'm smelly and haven't showered in a week nobody thinks it's because I'm depressed they're just like 'Oh Maria is just a dirty kid'."

John on the other hand has primarily been contending with the loss of his Traveler identity.

“It’s a sense of self that’s just gone really...I’m still finding little parts that I’m just trying to adjust to and major parts that I’m not fully adjusted to. I’m trying. We both spent a lot of years in just not the kind of normal life anyone would ever imagine usually,” said John.

“I don’t regret it, I just didn’t plan it,” John said of their current lives.

He finally, after living in San Marcos for eight months and buying the van, resolved the loss of his old life by a ceremonial retirement of his black “skank.” A skank is a cotton bandana Travelers wear around their necks to protect themselves from the choking smoke of a train tunnel. It’s also a status symbol in the community. John removed it and hung it from the mirror of the van they now drive.

In a happy turn of events the couple took another momentous step together in their new life. In May of 2018 they invited their friends and family to attend their wedding in a small ceremony in a local park nicknamed “Girl Scout Park”.

Friends helped them set up an impromptu chapel, composed of pews made out of slats of wood and cinderblocks, in a grove. A friend who was ordained performed the ceremony.

John wore a pirate-esque outfit, with a tricorn hat and a long black frock coat, similar to what he’d worn when they met. Maria sported a thigh-length off-white dress with multi-colored yarn dreads peeking out from under her veil. The ceremony was short and the after-party at their home went on into the night.

Victoria “Ria” Lynn Kolisar

Victoria Lynn Kolisar, known as Ria to her friends, sits under a bridge alongside the San Marcos River, her phone blaring out a bluegrass number while she accompanies it with rapids taps and clacks from a pair of heavyweight ornate spoons she plays, pulled from the velvet bag she keeps them in. Her thick black hair, pulled into her usual June Carter-esque half bouffant, blows across her face in the breeze while she moves her head to the song’s

beat. The spoons aren't quite the same as the set of bones, an instrument made of animal bones or wood, which she's been searching for. Though for now she's satisfied practicing her technique with spoons until she can acquire the real thing to play for herself.

When the walkway is clear, Kolisar stops her spoon tapping to take a furtive hit of bubble hash from a glass pipe she hides under her small red pack. Though this area is one she knows well enough to not expect any trouble with law enforcement since they won't pass through the area on patrol for a few more hours.

The 21-year-old comes to sit under the deserted bridge often, using the neglected walkway as an impromptu studio to practice playing and composing her own songs. As it gets towards evening she'll sling her mandolin across her back and make her way into downtown. There she'll try and pick up a spot in a live mic night at one of the local venues or catch another performer's show. If neither opportunity presents itself she'll hang out at Valentino's Pizza to chat with old friends and pass the time.

Nearly every day she makes the 13 mile drive up from her parent's house in New Braunfels to play music and enjoy the close-knit Traveler community in San Marcos. It also helps to fill the time while she works on figuring out how to get out of town

For the past six months Kolisar has been trapped in the area, unable to leave since her car, a Subaru Outback nicknamed "the Motorbooty", broke down as she was leaving town for Washington state.

Kolisar is what is known in the community as a "rubbertramp". "It's basically just living in your car is what it comes down to," said Kolisar.

Rubbertramps are just one subsection of the Traveler community who travel and live in their cars. Instead of hopping trains or hitchhiking they often modify a vehicle to use as both a mode of transportation and as their living space.

Without any way for Kolar to fix her car, which doubles as her home, she's been forced to move back in with her parents in New Braunfels, Texas. In the meantime she's been working to try and buy her mother's car to head back out again. It hasn't been an easy process to get used to living with them again.

Kolar grew up in Santa Clarita, California, before moving to New Braunfels with her family 10 years ago. Her parents are both former military; her father also worked with the Los Angeles Police Department as a narcotics detective.

She comes by her wanderlust honestly: some of Kolar's earliest memories are of her father telling stories about his days on the road.

"He would run away and he would travel. He was born and raised in Connecticut and he made it all the way to California " said Kolar. "He just hitchhiked and did that whole thing,"

Over the years she'd ride with friends to music festivals or go on trips with her family, but she'd never left to go out on her own.

"I was kind of a little too young, sheltered and kind of scared to do it...it wasn't allowed, " said Kolar.

However in early 2018 she got her chance when her friend Korn asked for a ride.

"So he was like 'Hey I'll give you half the amount of money in gas if you'll help me get to Colorado.'

Kolar remembered.

And I was like 'Yeah — fuck it.' Cause I was kind of scared to be alone at that time."

After that first trip and the freedom she experienced out on the road, Kolar started to seriously devote herself to a life of traveling.

“I like not having to answer to anybody,” she said. Being on the road offered her the chance to devote time to the things she enjoyed like her music and festivals. However, her parents were uneasy.

“They didn’t take it easily. Dad called me a transient quite a bit because he was like ‘I spent all this money trying to raise you, arresting transients, and you’re going to turn into one.’ It’s like, ‘Dad you don’t get it — it’s not the same,’” she said.

Living at home is different now that she has spent so long on her own. Kolisar jokes that “I’ve been getting food and showers more regularly, “than she would normally get living in her car.

” I’ve just got to answer to people that don’t respect me at all, even like my way of being comfortable. My asking to sleep outside with my dog in the backyard is met with screaming about how I’m this or that...the list goes on and on,” said Kolisar.

Sometimes she’ll just go and sleep in the car out in front of the house when she needs to get out of the house. “it’s just weird because I have been out of the house, I’ve been independent, for years.”

Kolisar’s parents had kicked her out of the house when she was 17. She’d been having a hard time in school due to what she saw as teachers not accommodating her learning process or listening to her when she reached out for help.

” I kind of had this idea with school of ‘Well, fuck it. I don’t care,’” she said. Kolisar would fight against her teachers and parents to give her answers on why they were treating her like a “problem child”.

“I just fought every day for my rights as a human being and they didn’t like it,” she said.

Kolisar's father was especially virulent about her behavior. "My dad didn't like it. My mom kind of understood, but she couldn't handle the pressure of what my dad was saying to her and the hell that was raining down on her."

One day, Kolisar walked out of the house during an argument and refused to come back, instead spending a few nights at a friend's house.

When she finally did return, her parents acted completely different. "All of a sudden everything was okay and I had a car," she said. Unwilling to live with her parents anymore, Kolisar took her new car and left despite her parents threats that they would call the police on her for theft.

Each of Kolisar's decisions since then in the eyes of her parents has just been proof that she is "a piece of shit that couldn't keep my shit together and 'blah blah blah'. It's just been a whole cycle," she said.

Adding to the strangeness of her current situation is the desire to be back out on the road.

"You get this feeling of the wind picking you up and we're just like, 'I gotta go.' And you don't really know where you want to go and you don't really know how you are going to get there but you have it [the feeling]," said Kolisar.

Being stuck and being unable to move intensifies that feeling.

"It nags at me. It's like, 'Go. Do something. Leave.' I'm like a hamster in a cage like I need to leave I need to leave I need to leave because I get stuck in this cycle of 'Okay I'm going to go to Valentino's' or 'I'm going to go walk around the Square'."

"I love everybody here [San Marcos] and it's a great time when I see everybody," she said "But it's the same thing everyday and I hate that."

At the same time, Kolisar knows that being somewhere for the long term is something she is going to have to adjust to.

“Maybe that makes me crazy because that’s the part of life that I, one way or another, should have to get used to or at least that’s what my parents say.”

However, she isn’t worried about the transition; she is working on getting her aesthetician’s license again and she has connections in the community to have steady employment when she wants it.

“It’s just, honestly, not my time right now. I’m not trying to travel my whole life; I guess I’d like to if I get paid to do it one day. I’m not trying to just be this wanderer, Traveler, and aimlessly just go. I’m 20. I don’t want to settle down right now. I know I can, because I have. I guess I have a serious case of FOMO, fear of missing out,” said Kolisar.

Being in one place for so long did have an upside; in September, Kolisar left for the first leg of Cannabis Common Sense Tour with Justin James Bridges and his band, as whatever they needed from back-up vocals to helping sell merchandise.

The tour, which offered live music, aimed to educate and promote the use of medical marijuana to the public and to change the public’s perception of marijuana users through advocacy events and live music shows. Kolisar, an avowed advocate of the benefits of medicinal marijuana, was happy to join the tour to help spread the message.

Most importantly for Kolisar, she got exposure.

“I was able to go out and market myself,” she said.

She stopped in San Marcos for a quick visit after the eastern leg of the tour and plans to join up with the band when they head out for California.

“I’ve gotta get my music out there somehow,” she said.

Corey Kelshaw

It’s nearly 8 p.m. on a Sunday and Corey Kelshaw, a 27-year-old from Wisconsin, is standing in the backyard of John and Maria’s house drinking a Lone Star beer and fending off enthusiastic licks and head bumps from their dog Hades. Kelshaw’s curly brown hair is pushed out of his face. He has rings of scabs and bruising around his eyes, and scrapes and stitches, mostly on his right hand, from a recent misadventure: with his bike broken, he’d tried to hitch a ride on a train to his job at the outlet mall. He forgot that as trains get to the outskirts of town they speed up. But by the time he realized his mistake, he had to either jump or ride the train to San Antonio. He jumped.

Bleeding profusely and with a concussion, he’d wandered into a residential area to wait for Kolar to come and get him, though someone had already called for an ambulance.

“I told them I fell skating,” he said, since he’d have gotten into trouble for illegally riding a train. He’d only been in San Marcos around a month at this point.

Kelshaw lived in Triple Falls, Wisconsin most of his life before setting out on the road.

“It’s a lot of farms. A lot of wilderness, and the further north you go into Wisconsin, the more wooded and like back-ass it gets,” Kelshaw said, describing his home state. At 13 or 14 he started to leave town with friends to go to punk shows or to skateboarding tournaments out of town, sometimes even out of the state. He was also experimenting with alcohol and drugs.

“I would just go on vacations, but it wasn’t really like a vacations. It would just be like, ‘Oh there’s a show in Chicago, or there’s a show in Minneapolis– do you want to go?’ It’s like ‘How long are we going to be there?’ ‘I don’t really know.’ ‘Alright cool – let’s just get in the car and go.’”

Through these trips he got exposed to a lot of hitchhikers and Travelers and the freedom of doing what he wanted, which was listen to music and skate. Kelshaw also thinks that his anger because of the deaths of his grandparents, who he’d seen as huge influences on his life, when he was around 15 contributed to his decision to keep leaving home. The loss, he remembered, made him feel that nothing about his life then really mattered anymore.

“I don’t care if I live or die—I’m just going to do what I love,” he said. “I’m just going to live fast and fucking die hard.”

For Kelshaw traveling offered a particular thrill.

“Every time you go somewhere new, everything is completely new. The food you eat. The alcohol you drink. The cigarettes you smoke. The places you sleep. The way people treat you,” he said. “It’s just exciting.”

He’d still return home periodically and try to fit into that life again.

“There were times where I would come home and just honestly try to be normal, so to speak; have a 9 to 5 job, pay rent and pay bills. But then the, what we would call the ‘swilliness’ — where you just get drunk and not give a fuck — would kick in and I would get kicked out of the house and out back onto the streets.”

Kelshaw decided he wasn’t going to try to sleep in the woods or under bridges and work a job.

“If I’m going to go back to sleeping outside, I’m just going to go back to fucking being a street kid,” he said. So he did.

On the road he wasn’t living the healthiest lifestyle: “a lot of fucking drugs, a lot of fucking drinking at a really young age. It was fun. I mean, nowadays the bad outweighs the good, but at the time the good definitely outweighed the bad.”

“If I had money and nothing to do, it was drinking and smoking weed--doing whatever drug I could get my hands on—anything to pass the time,” he said.

Until, Kelshaw claims, he had to have heart surgery. He said he considers that somewhat of a wake up call.

“When you’re 25 and you get told you only have six or seven years to live if you keep living the same life it kind of changes things,” he said. “I don’t want to be dead when I’m 32. I used to not care, but after I made it past 18--I made it past 21 and 25--it’s like, ‘Shit, I’m 27; maybe I *should* start giving a fuck.’”

Despite his concerns over his health, there’s still a part of him that wants to be out on the road, no matter the consequences.

In July of 2018, Kelshaw met Kolar in Colorado and grabbed a ride with her to San Marcos, where he decided to try and settle down. Renting the back bedroom at John and Maria’s house, he worked serving hot dogs at a Frank’s Hotdogs food truck at the Tanger Outlet mall.

He says of the change that it’s “more or less just changing the mindset of, ‘I can do whatever the fuck I want throughout the day,’ to ‘I need to be responsible and fill out job applications and make sure I’m paying rent and that I’m buying food.’”

He’s also eating regularly and drinking water and “not like just getting fucked up all day.”

His usual approach of not caring about the people around him has shifted as well, especially now that he has roommates.

“If I want to stay in a place, I need to start respecting people that are around on a day-to-day basis and start building relationships with them,” he said. “It’s hard to stay in a place when everybody in that place thinks you’re a piece of shit.”

At the same time Corey has tried to set up in other towns at various points in his life and knows that being on the move is something that he feels more comfortable with.

“As hard as I tried to get away from it, it just fucked my life up worse,” he said, referring to his attempt to settle down. “It was always easier to just do this [traveling] and my life was always better when I did this.”

Despite the opportunities he sees in his new life, he knows that from his past choices as a Traveler he is still extremely limited in what he can do.

“I’ll never be able to buy a house. I’ll never be able to get a loan,” he said. “But I never really cared about any of that stuff anyways, so I guess it doesn’t really affect me until I want to actually have a family and shit.”

Kelshaw’s not sure what exactly he is working towards, but he is hopeful that things will get better.

“I’m just going to do everything I can each day to make my future brighter and better... I don’t know,” he said.

He’s not exactly sure what lies ahead for him. “Maybe death?” he jokes. “Or maybe prison or a wife and kid. Fuck, who knows...as long as I wake up tomorrow – awesome. But if I don’t wake up tomorrow — awesome. It is what it is.”

In September, Maria posted on Facebook that Kelshaw hadn't been seen at the house for a few days and was asking if anyone in town had seen him. Maria eventually switched to checking the San Marcos Police Department's arrest records before word reached her that Kelshaw was in fact fine. He'd left town for Colorado.

Nicholas "Olas" Ross

The reclaimed wood floor of the guesthouse under Nicholas "Olas" Ross' feet doesn't reveal that a year ago this building had been an old abandoned barn that he'd help clean for the property owner's mother. The project is just one part of the job Ross has been working on for the last year—to reclaim and build a house on a property in Fredericksburg—as part of his job as a builder and carpenter for Journeymen Carpentry.

The house is one of the first that Ross has ever worked on long term. Usually, he's worked as day labor. As proud as the 29-year-old is of the project, "admittedly it's more fun to talk about it than it is to actually work on it," he said.

Before he became a Traveler at the age of 21, Ross worked in Wyoming in the oil fields, primarily with cleaning and maintaining methane holes, before he got laid off. At that point, he was living eight miles outside of town and drinking heavily. His life felt stagnant and the increasing isolation of his lifestyle was affecting his health.

One of his friends, who often hitchhiked, often came to visit him. On his last trip up, Ross decided to leave with him – leaving Wyoming and hitchhiking.

For Ross, hitchhiking was a near spiritual experience.

"The only time I've ever really experienced faith, at least faith in humanity, is alone on the side of the road with a thumb out," he said.

For years that worked for him.

“I always just liked being somewhere else, and it wasn’t that I had to be someone else somewhere else. It was being me somewhere else,” Ross said.

Over time, the Traveler scene started to change. And so did he. He’d passed through Austin, and what he saw there of his fellow Travelers made him pause.

“It’s gotten to such a perverted level of like you know, ‘Fuck you! I live like this so you don’t have to’... and it stopped making sense,” he said.

“When I got to Austin is when it was the clearest thing. I do not want to be this person. I do not want to be ungrateful while I have nothing. It seems like it should be such a simple thing. I have nothing and you are offering me a thing. I am grateful for your offer of this thing. Motherfuckers in Austin are like ‘psh,’ toss it off to the side when we get handed food,” Ross remembered.

He’d later be flying a sign, holding up a handwritten sign, to ask for money or food, along I-35 in San Marcos, Texas, with a friend to get enough cash for a hotel room, and found something that he liked about the town. Over the years, he felt drawn back.

“There is something here and I can’t figure it out. I’ve left and come back, left and come back. The last time I left I experienced something I’ve never experienced in my whole life: homesickness,” he said. “It screwed me up because I’ve never had that feeling.”

Additionally the rigors of being out on the road were taking its toll on him.

“I could feel myself even in my young 20s just getting haggard. Like just hurting, hurting myself, and just living poorly. It wasn’t in my psychology to accept where I was at yet, and I was living rough,” said Ross.

Ross admits part of the struggle was due to a serious drinking problem then, one he still has to keep an eye on today.

“I was at the borderline of doing terrible things, and so I really knew that I couldn’t sustain that lifestyle,” he said. “I knew that as much as I didn’t want to be alive, I didn’t want to die.”

He felt like he was losing his sense of self and purpose, and the line he’d carefully drawn for himself –he would never rob, exploit or murder people for the things he needed—was getting less clear by the day.

“I was afraid of what I would be capable of if I did cross that line,” Ross said. “Ultimately, selfishness and depravity didn’t line up with my heart.”

He picked San Marcos as a place to be for a time while he got centered and figured out what he wanted to do.

Ross started out with a job at Valentino’s Pizza and from there worked a series of jobs until he got his current job as a carpenter and builder with Journeymen Carpentry.

At the same time, he also joined a punk and bluegrass style band, 36” Wheels, and they’re working together to book new gigs and write material for the band. When he’s not writing songs for the group, he plays drums and the washboard for their shows.

“I’m not looking to write a fucking Billboard Top 10 Album,” he said. “I don’t give a shit about that. It’s therapy.”

While he doesn’t expect the band to turn him and his bandmates into rock stars, it’s a fun thing to keep him around the town for now.

As for the future, Ross has plans to get back on the road; the idea of staying in one place and working for other people isn't appealing to him. His girlfriend, Lindsey Adams, and he have talked about going out on the renaissance fair circuit and getting whatever other work they can pick up.

"The goal between us is to sustain a liberal life on the road one way or another," he said.

Adams just bought a fifth wheel trailer, which allows a camper to connect to a vehicle so it can be transported, so in the two years she has to pay that off, Ross plans to buy a truck to pull the trailer before he and Lindsey set out together.

For a man who didn't think he'd live to see 30, the last few years have been a turning point in his life.

"It's strange because I actually see a future that I want to participate in for the first time in my life. I didn't think I was going to make it this far and I mean, yeah, I've got some nicks and scrapes and bumps and bruises," he said. "My whole kind of goal is to kind of die alive and know that I didn't die for nothing and live for nothing."

Photographs



Photograph 1: Maria, 25, wears a bandana, known as a skank in the Traveler community, used to protect her lungs in a smoke-filled train tunnel.



Photograph 2: Maria points out an anarchy symbol drawn on the vest she wore while traveling. The vest serves both as protective clothing and as a way to wear tradable commodities like patches or sewn on decorative items that could be bartered.



Photograph 3: John and Maria sit barefoot in the living room on their joint day off from work at their rented house.



Photograph 4: Corey Kelshaw, 27, stands in John and Maria's living room revealing the damage to his shoulder caused by his ill-timed jump off a train that he'd tried to catch a ride to work on.



Photograph 5: Corey Kelshaw, 27, rubs tentatively at his eye, still bruised from his jump off a train, while he smokes a cigarette in the backyard.



Photograph 6: Tattoos of a pig and a rooster decorate the top of Corey Kelshaw's feet, these designs are from an old sailor tradition meant to protect the wearer from drowning in a shipwreck. However, Corey says his artist accidentally put the animals in the wrong order.



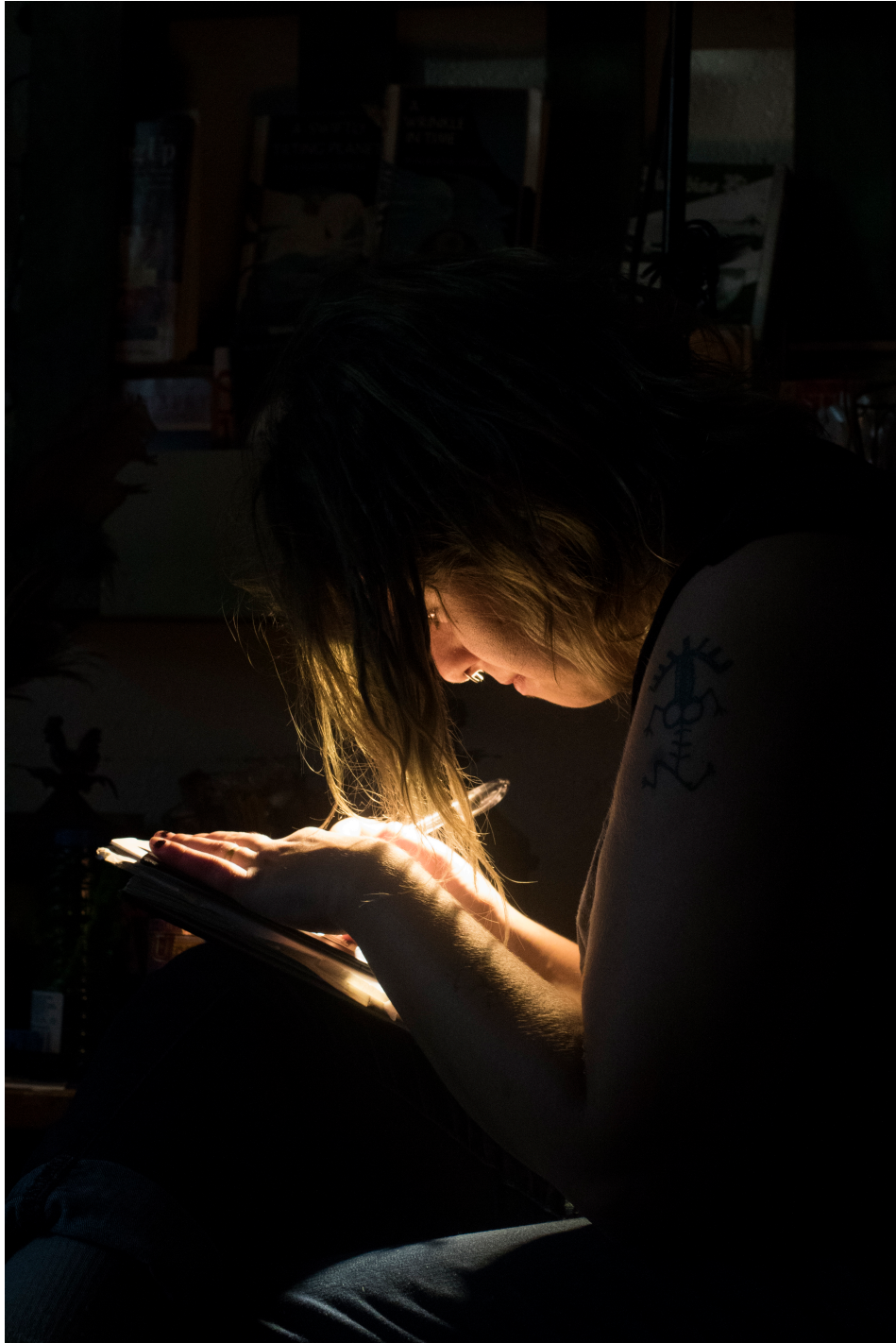
Photograph 7: Corey Kelshaw, 27, walks across the parking lot of the Major Brand Gas Station to pick up more beer at the convenience store.



Photograph 8: John, 30, wears his vest from his Traveler days as he sits in his living room. The various patches were collected during his travels and sewn on using dental floss.



Photograph 9: John pets their dog Hades while he and Maria sit in their living room watching illegally streamed episodes of the cartoon “Bob’s Burgers” on a laptop.



Photograph 10: By the light of a desk lamp, Maria sketches and writes in her journal before the couple heads out for the evening.



Photograph 11: Nicholas "Olas" Ross, 29, rubs at his shoulder after taking a fall off his unicycle during his unicycle football team's practice.



Photograph 12: In the backyard of their rented home, Lindsey Addams, 26, uses a comb to section out her boyfriend Nicholas “Olas” Ross’s hair while she works to straighten out the sides of his new hairline. The couple have been together for several months and plan to move into a trailer and make their living on the road together.



Photograph 13: Maria, 25, kicks her foot up onto the dash in the front seat of the couple's 1993 G20 Chevrolet van while she waits for John to come back during a trip around town to dumpster dive for clothes and things for the house.



Photograph 14: Using the support of the dumpster wall as a step, Maria climbs up into a dumpster at a local student apartment complex.



Photograph 15: Maria surveys the Dakota Ranch apartment complex's dumpster contents from the lip of the structure while her husband John carefully wades through to sort through items at the far end.



Photograph 16: Victoria Kolar, 21, keeps an eye out for police and pedestrians while she takes a quick draw on her pipe of marijuana bubble hash under a bridge along the San Marcos River.



Photograph 17: In lieu of a mirror Victoria Kolisar, 21, uses a reflective Shiner beer sign while she fixes her lipstick at Valentino's Pizza, a local San Marcos hangout for Travelers.



Photograph 18: Victoria Kolar, 21, stands in the parking lot behind Valentino's Pizza where she used to live in her car for several years after her parents kicked her out when she was 17.



Photograph 19: Nicholas “Olas” Ross, 29, lifts a piece of lumber out of the way while tidying up the housing site he has been working on in Fredericksburg, Texas for the past year.



Photograph 20: Nicholas “Olas” Ross, 29, holds a joint of marijuana in one hand while his dog, Freckles, stands on his knee to lick at Ross’s face while on break from his job.



Photograph 21: In his bathroom Nicholas “Olas” Ross, 29, examines a clump of hair in his hand while cutting his hair with an electric razor.



Photograph 22: Lindsey Addams, 26, and Nicholas “Olas” Ross, 29, prepare dinner together in the kitchen of their rented home.



Photograph 23: Victoria Kolisar, 21, works the strap of her guitar over her head after running to grab it from her car for an informal Traveler song-swap session at Valentino's Pizza. Whenever musically gifted Travelers get together they will often play together and teach each other new songs.



Photograph 24: On stage at Valentino's Pizza, Victoria Kolar, 21, accompanies a fellow musician in a playing of the band Old Crow Medicine Show's song "We Don't Grow Tobacco" during a Traveler song-swap.



Photograph 25: During a break from performing at Valentino's Pizza, Victoria Kolar quickly checks her phone messages, before heading back to her parent's house in New Braunfels, Texas.

Vita

Denise Anne-Marie Cathey was born in Houston, Texas. After graduating from Klein Collins High School in 2010 she entered Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Studio Practices with a concentration in Fine Art Photography in 2015. During the following year she worked as a photojournalist for the San Marcos Daily Record. In August of 2016 she entered the Graduate School at The University of Texas at Austin.

Permanent email: Catheydenise@gmail.com

This report was typed by the author.